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ABSTRACT

The paper examines varieties of program assessment in institutions of higher education and proposes a procedure to implement systematic assessment of program outcomes. Presented in a question-and-answer format, the paper first addresses common faculty concerns about formal assessment in sections titled, "Why Not Use GPA (Grade Point Average)?" and "Isn't Placement Our Best Indicator?" Assessment development and implementation are addressed in answers to the following questions: How much will this cost? How do we get started? Will standardized exams assess what we teach? Will local exams be any good? Will students cooperate in assessment? Will my work be recognized? How much time will this take? and What good will assessment do? The paper streses the importance of: viewing assessment as a priority for everyone within the institution; building assessment into established procedures (such as curriculum review, strategic planning, and peer review); and rewarding faculty and students for their involvement in assessment. Includes seven references. (DB)

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QUESTIONS FACULTY ASK ABOUT ASSESSMENT

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QUESTIONS FACULTY ASK ABOUT ASSESSMENT

Trudy W. Banta

"Assessment is the means by which students learn to lead an examined life, and colleges cannot exemplify that goal for students if they do not adequately evaluate their own programs of teaching" [Ehrmann, 1988]. This rationale, coupled with the societal pressures of consumerism and cost containment and recent critiques of higher education from within its own ranks [Association of American Colleges, 1985; Boyer, 1987], has produced unprecedented interest and activity in the area of assessing the outcomes of higher education.

The National Governors' Association has reported that 24 states now require publicly-supported colleges and universities to engage in assessment, and 12 other states are considering such a requirement [National Governors' Association, 1988]. All six regional accrediting associations include outcomes assessment in their standards for accreditation of post-secondary institutions. Not surprisingly, the American Council on Education's Campus Trends, 1988 revealed that assessment activities were underway at two-thirds of the public institutions and 40 percent of the independent colleges surveyed for this annual study [El-Khawas, 1988].

The following remarks will be based somewhat on my experience in visiting almost 40 campuses in 21 states over the last four years, but they are shaped primarily by my work as coordinator of assessment at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, a position I have held since 1982.

"Why not use GPA?"

A common initial reaction of faculty to the idea of assessing student outcomes in a comprehensive way, that is, above and beyond the traditional classroom examination, is to ask, "How does this differ from grade point average? Isn't cumulative grade point average the best indication of what students have learned in college?"

Based on most studies of grade point average (for example, Milton, Pollio, and Eison, 1986) the answer to this question is a resounding "No." Cumulative grade point average is a product of ability, motivation, and just plain luck. It is most closely related to student ability, and bears little relationship to success in life beyond college.

The whole of the educational experience is much greater than the sum of a series of individual courses. Without some comprehensive product--preferably a series of products--to show how well a student can integrate what he or she has learned, students may proceed through the curriculum and graduate without leaving the faculty with any sense of how they will respond when confronted with the larger problems they will encounter in the world beyond the classroom.

"Isn't placement our best indicator?"

At research universities, faculty are wont to say, "We judge our success by the placement of our students in the best graduate programs."

At 2-year institutions and in selected disciplines at 4-year colleges, faculty contend that the best indicator of their success with students is a substantial record of job placement in the fields for which students have been prepared. These faculty ask, "Why should we add another measure of program outcomes when we are satisfied with the information we get from placement data?"

Information about student placement is an important indicator of program success, and should be used in a profile of indicators of effectiveness. This information is not sufficient in and of itself however, because in most postsecondary institutions across the country, graduate education is not a goal of a majority of the students. Therefore, it is not appropriate to base the success of the entire program on the success of a minority of the student population. Job placement is not a goal of every student, either. Moreover, employment in a field that appears to be unrelated to a student's primary discipline may not in the long run prove to be a negative consequence.

In any case, following the career success of former students is time-consuming, difficult, and expensive. When we ask faculty "How many of your students have you tracked in graduate school or in jobs?" we often find that they have no systematic means of doing this work. They rely simply on information received from those students who voluntarily keep in touch with their former professors. They rarely write down the comments they do receive, and when asked to recall students' reactions, selective memory may create a more positive summary than the facts warrant.

"How much will this cost?"

After some of the initial defensiveness is alleviated and faculty begin to entertain the possibility that they will become involved in assessment, a common question is "How much will assessment cost?" Most of the assessment offices established in the last eight years are very small--no more than a couple of positions. Some are headed by a faculty member who spends 25-50 percent of his or her time coordinating assessment.

At the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where assessment is a very important activity, we draw upon services in every division of the institution to assist in testing students, recording the results of their performance, and compiling reports for various audiences. On all of these functions, we annually spend about ten dollars per enrolled student. This is an amount equal to about one tenth of one percent of the University's total budget. Those who have found the results of assessment activities to be helpful in improving the student experience consider these dollars well spent.

"How do we get started?"

Once faculty have made a commitment to do something about assessment, they ask, "How do we get started?" I would suggest that they begin by responding to the question, "What do we need to know to help us help students?

Are students learning? How do you know? How could they learn more? These answers will differ for every department. A good way to begin is with a statement of goals for student development. What is the content of the discipline and what are the ways of knowing in the field? (Both content and process should be assessed.) What are essential student services? What are they designed to do; what will they promote?

"Will standardized exams assess what we teach?"

When faculty and student services staff have thought through their goals for student development, they can begin to devise ways of measuring student progress toward those goals. Most faculty begin by looking at standardized exams that may be available, and the most important question in connection with this review is, "If we use standardized exams, will they reflect what we teach?"

The answer to this question will vary from campus to campus because each faculty has different strengths and, not surprisingly, differing goals for student development. Since standardized exams offer the benefits of well constructed items and norms for score comparison, a faculty may decide to use a standardized exam even though the test does not reflect all of the important areas that appear in their goals statement. Ideally, they will supplement the information gained from the standardized instrument by developing their own measures of student performance. At UTK, for instance, the French faculty decided to use the National Teacher Exam Specialty Area in French for its seniors, but

designed their own measures of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in order to provide broader coverage of their curricular goals.

"Will local exams be any good?"

Faculty examination of measurement instruments for use in assessment is often accompanied by the question, "If we develop our own measures, will they be any good?" Faculty themselves are the best judges of the goodness of a measure. If they believe they have developed a good exam and trust the results that it yields, they will use those results to suggest improvements in what they are doing with and for students, and that is the ultimate objective of assessment.

We can provide some advice for faculty who embark on the task of developing their own measures. First, use a variety of measures, not just one. Be especially wary of falling into the trap of devising a single multiple-choice exam simply because you think that is the only kind of student performance that can be "objectively" evaluated. Ways are available to make a variety of types of faculty judgment reliable, thus comparable over time.

The items on any instrument should be clear, both to colleagues in the discipline and the students who will be responding to them. Both groups should be asked to review items before they are used for assessment. Respected colleagues outside the institution can be asked to compare items on an assessment instrument with the faculty's goals statement to

establish the degree of congruence between the two. Then students, including graduate students in the department and even students in other disciplines, can be asked to pilot-test the items and offer their own reactions and constructive criticism.

Assessment instruments should include measures of performance that permit students to exhibit knowledge and skills faculty believe they will need for effective participation in the discipline following graduation. Such measures might include portfolios of writing, artistic productions, videotapes of teaching and other oral presentations, poster presentations in the sciences, or simulations of on-the-job performance. Over time faculty can evaluate these instruments by following up program graduates and linking their future successes with performance on the comprehensive assessment in the major.

"Will students cooperate in assessment?"

As faculty become immersed in assessment design, they begin to worry about student participation. A common question is "How can we motivate students to take part in assessment activities?"

The answer is to involve students from the beginning in the assessment process. Student representatives can serve on the faculty committee that determines the direction of assessment. Some students can assist in evaluating instruments. For instance, students on one campus may serve as the pilot-test subjects for instruments designed for use on another

campus. Graduate students may provide feedback on strategies that will be used for undergraduate assessment in a department.

The most important thing for faculty to do in gaining student cooperation is to communicate to students that assessment is important to the future of their program, that faculty are invested in the process and will use the results in making improvements, and that ultimately students will be the beneficiaries. Faculty should present each student with their judgments about the student's performance. This conversation will be helpful to the student in making sense of the scores and may lead to further understanding of program strengths and weaknesses on the part of the faculty member(s) involved.

Students should understand that their performance on assessment activities will give them a reading on the level of their achievement of faculty-developed program objectives, and they can use this data in presenting a fuller picture of their abilities and skills to an employer. Having the opportunity to use assessment results in employment resumés has been demonstrated to be a potent factor in fostering student motivation to participate honestly and conscientiously.

"Will my work be recognized?"

Faculty will almost certainly ask, "Will I be compensated or recognized for my work in assessment?" Many program administrators with assessment experience view faculty involvement as essential to effective performance

in their departments. They have negotiated agreements with faculty that provide released time or extra compensation for assessment design and administration. In addition, the institution may provide special awards and recognition for faculty who make outstanding contributions to assessment.

"How much time will this take?"

"Will this take too much time from my preparation for teaching or from my research?" Assessment certainly can be used to improve classroom teaching. Joint efforts to develop goals and specific objectives for the curriculum make each faculty member more cognizant of related objectives for their own courses. They then begin to share these objectives with students, and the result is a more systematic approach throughout the department to the achievement of specified goals. Heretofore, the adherence to specific goals for a discipline, and especially for general education, has been sporadic throughout the institution. Activities associated with preparing for assessment have promoted a sense of shared purpose among faculty. The use of rational planning is promoted by an emphasis on assessment.

At UTK faculty have been encouraged through a series of awards provided by the provost to make assessment a subject of their research. During 1988-89 faculty in four colleges received institutional funding for work on projects related to improving their departmental assessment instruments. Faculty throughout the institution have contributed to

assessment initiatives developing within their own disciplinary and professional organizations. A bibliography of assessment-related presentations and publications prepared by UTK faculty now contains over 100 entries.

"What good will assessment do?"

A final and important question is, "What good will assessment do?" Tom Moran at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh, says that assessment on his campus has initiated a dialogue about learning that has led faculty to become more involved in scholarly activity related to their teaching. Assessment has stimulated collaboration, among faculty, between faculty and students, and among students as they talk about assessment procedures and results. As a consequence of this coming together, faculty and students increasingly view learning as a shared responsibility.

On a number of campuses -- King's College in Pennsylvania is a good example -- assessment activities have provided a means of rejuvenating faculty experiencing burnout. Assessment is an endeavor that calls for innovative thinking and new approaches to curriculum organization, teaching, and classroom testing. Faculty are stimulated to find new ways to involve students in learning, in classroom interaction and assignments and on course exams.

Perhaps the most important benefit of all is that assessment can enhance student learning. Faculty approach teaching and test-making more systematically and provide increasing amounts of feedback to students

concerning their performances. Students are learning more about their strengths and weaknesses and about alternative paths to improvement.

Some Recommendations

Having considered some of the questions faculty ask about assessment, it may be in order to suggest a few general recommendations. First, assessment must be viewed as a priority for everyone within the institution, from the top administrators to faculty to students. All of these groups should be involved in discussion about the purposes and uses of assessment. Administrators must establish an atmosphere of trust in which faculty feel free to discover curricular and instructional weaknesses and to ask for assistance in correcting these weaknesses.

Assessment should be built into established procedures that have meaning in the life of the institution, such as curriculum review, strategic planning, and peer review. This gives assessment a raison d'etre that will assure its continuation.

Faculty should be recognized and rewarded for their involvement in assessment and students should be recognized for their participation and conscientious effort in assessment activities. It is very important to stress faculty and student interaction during the design and administration of assessment techniques and especially in the analysis of results. Students can gain information about their own development, and faculty can gain insight into the success of their assessment techniques by talking with students about their reactions to assessment procedures.

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